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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000870

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PHUM SOCI PGOV SCUL PREL KIRF VM HUMANR RELFREE
SUBJECT: HCMC RELIGION COMMITTEE DISCUSSES DETAINED MENNONITE PASTOR WITH HOUSE CHURCH LEADER

REF: A)HCMC 0232 B)HCMC 0796 C)HCMC 0789 D)03 HCMC 0251 E)03 HCMC 1222

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On June 23, ranking officials from the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) met with Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF) leader Pham Dinh Nhan (please protect) to admonish him over his activities on behalf of detained Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang and, more generally, the underground house church movement. Although the meeting's primary purpose was to warn the VEF not to protest Pastor Quang's arrest, Pastor Nhan said he welcomed the opportunity to discuss the house church movement with CRA officials, after seeking unsuccessfully for several years to arrange a formal meeting for his organization. While his meeting with the CRA did not yield new information about Pastor Quang, Pastor Nhan told ConGenoffs that police have continued to question Pastor Quang's wife and at least one other VEF pastor. He believes that the GVN plans to deal with Pastor Quang harshly. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On the morning of June 23, Protestant Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan met with Mr. Vo Ngoc Hue (First Deputy) and Mr. Tran Ngoc Bao (Catholic and Protestant Affairs) of the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs, at their request. He met with ConGenoffs later that same afternoon. According to Pastor Nhan, the CRA officials told him they had requested the meeting in response to his March 2004 letter to HCMC Communist Party Secretary Nguyen Minh Triet concerning the arrests of four Mennonite followers of Pastor Quang (ref A) earlier that month. They also chastised him for his letter to the VEF membership regarding Pastor Quang's recent detention (refs B and C). (Pastor Quang is affiliated with the VEF.) That letter was also posted on the Internet. The CRA officials warned Pastor Nhan against sending any further letters on behalf of the VEF, since the organization is not legally recognized by the GVN. They emphasized that since the VEF had no legal rights, no one could refer to the entity as an organization, draft or send correspondence on its behalf, or claim to serve in a VEF leadership position.

¶3. (SBU) Pastor Nhan told ConGenoffs he had challenged the CRA officials by redirecting the conversation toward a discussion of the history of the house church movement and its current needs and struggles in Vietnam. While the CRA continued to focus on the illegal status of the VEF and the unlawful nature of the group's activities, he tried to use the meeting as a forum to explain the house church movement and urge the GVN to allow unregistered churches to operate freely. Pastor Nhan pointed out to the officials that believers have waited nearly 30 years for progress in achieving legal recognition and freedom to worship without government interference. The officials countered that, while mistakes had been made in prior decades, the past six years have seen real change and, as such, the GVN should be evaluated based only on what has transpired in the more recent past. Furthermore, the officials claimed the GVN did not interfere with worship at most house churches, but only those that were "very extreme." They said the GVN had to "stop" those who were "extreme."

¶4. (SBU) Pastor Nhan said he had been firm in asserting that problems remained, even for moderates. He pressed the GVN to stop slandering Pastor Quang in the press when he had not yet been convicted of anything. He stressed that the GVN should stop trying to ignore the existence of house churches by refusing to grant them legal status. It was time to accept that the house churches were a fact in Vietnam, as in other countries around the world. The GVN should work to find a way to accommodate house churches and address their spiritual needs. While the house churches in big cities like HCMC rarely had problems, Pastor Nhan had complained that the lack of clear direction from the central government allowed provincial police in remote or less developed areas of the country to take matters into their own hands. He asserted that most house church members wanted to cooperate with the GVN, but only if they were allowed to practice their religion as they wished. The CRA responded that the GVN provides for spiritual needs by allowing individuals and families to worship privately in their homes, as well as in registered churches. They pointed to the expected issuance of a new religious decree in November that would reaffirm those rights. (Pastor Nhan told ConGenoffs he was concerned the decree would make the situation worse for house churches by making organized religious activities even more restricted and controlled. He worried that this could lead to "more and more serious conflict.")

¶5. (SBU) According to Pastor Nhan, the CRA members also told him it was "not good" that "some among your group" are speaking with officers at the Consulate General in HCMC. The CRA members claimed this needlessly inflated small matters that should be handled without foreign government involvement. However, Pastor Nhan said he was not worried about his own safety. In fact, despite their warnings, the pastor was pleased to meet with the CRA members, because the VEF had been requesting a formal meeting with the CRA for the past several years without success. He interpreted the CRA's reluctance to meet officially with the VEF as a reflection of their concern that they would somehow confer legitimacy on the house church movement. In fact, the CRA members stressed that the June 23rd meeting should be considered as a discussion among "private individuals" and had refused Pastor Nhan's request to include other VEF officials. Still, Pastor Nhan viewed the session positively, seeing it as a step toward establishing a dialogue between the Committee and house church leaders. He was pleased that the CRA officials expressed a "general willingness" to receive information about house churches and perhaps meet again in the future, although they did not want this meeting or the possibility of a future meeting discussed with others.

¶6. (SBU) The CRA officials did not provide any information about Pastor Quang's current condition, whereabouts, or the timeline under which his case might proceed. The VEF believes that Pastor Quang is being held in District 2, but police there have not confirmed this and have refused to accept personal items that family members have brought for Pastor Quang. Meanwhile, police continue to "invite" Pastor Quang's wife to the police station, where they have pressed her to sign a document stating she witnessed them open sealed evidence bags taken from the June 9 search of Pastor Quang's house. Not knowing if the bags were opened and then resealed by the police, she has refused to sign anything. The police have called in at least one other VEF pastor to express their anger about the letter Pastor Nhan sent to VEF members announcing the detention of Pastor Quang. In addition, Pastor Nhan said police are actively searching for Pastor Quang's assistant, whom they had previously questioned and released. Pastor Nhan noted that documents taken by the police from Quang's residence would make it clear that the assistant was fully involved in Pastor Quang's work. Pastor Nhan told ConGen that a third individual associated with Pastor Quang and the March events was detained on June 30th. Separately, Mennonite Church USA sent Embassy Hanoi a letter that reports unsubstantiated claims of beatings, destruction of homes and personal effects, and even possible loss of life. (Note: In the past, Pastor Quang has indicated he has little contact with his church in the U.S.)

¶7. (SBU) Pastor Nhan believes recent police and CRA warnings to various church leaders not to become involved in Pastor Quang's case are a sign that the GVN is preparing to deal "severely" with Pastor Quang once he is brought to trial. In this context, Pastor Nhan said he had heard that CRA officials had spoken with the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV -- the registered Protestant umbrella group in the south) leadership about Pastor Quang. The CRA officials reportedly conveyed the message that the SECV should not interfere, since Pastor Quang is of a different denomination and this is not a church issue. In addition, the government had warned Pastor Quang about his activities many times and he had chosen not to listen. Pastor Nhan noted that the GVN's charges against Pastor Quang "cover everything" except religious activities, allowing them to portray this as a secular matter.

¶8. (SBU) When asked what role the USG could play in promoting religious freedom in Vietnam, Pastor Nhan urged the USG to encourage increased dialogue between Vietnamese government officials and house church leaders. He said many GVN officials, including some on the CRA, appear to have a very limited understanding of the house church movement, and he would welcome any opportunity to educate them. He also hoped that USG officials would continue to seek information about the "real situation" that house churches face. He stressed, however, that progress on religious freedom in Vietnam would take time.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: As Post has reported previously (reftels), Pastor Quang has a mixed record that complicates any response by his followers or others to his detention. On the one hand he has a long history as a house church leader who has faced difficulties directly related to this role. On the other hand, he has admitted to ConGen that reports of GVN actions against him have at times been exaggerated in order to gain international support. He has also engaged in some questionable activities as part of his activist campaign against the GVN that may leave him open to arrest based on non-religious activities, regardless of his motivation. It appears from Pastor Nhan's remarks that the GVN may be moving to exploit this vulnerability.
YAMAUCHI